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"If I Had Been The President"

Sen. Margaret Chase Smith, R-Maine, may be entirely sure on the campaign circuit in New Hampshire what she would have done in two separate Cuban crises if she had been President of the United States. She could not have been quite so sure if she really had been President.

"Had I been President," she said Monday, "I would have given air cover to the invasion of the Bay of Pigs or I never would have approved that invasion."

That obviously is not the forthright statement she apparently intended it to be. Which would she have done—provided air cover or canceled the proposed invasion?

Anyone who sat through the State Department's off-the-record background briefing for newsmen shortly after the Bay of Pigs fiasco can never forget the vivid record of contradictions there. Some of the highest officials in the State Department said they had been assured by intelligence experts that Dictator Fidel Castro's military forces were relatively weak and that the Cuban people were ready to rise in revolt against him if Cuban exiles invaded. Then a high official of the Central Intelligence Agency flatly stated that the CIA reports to the government had been accurate, both as to the strength of Castro's forces and as to his support among the Cuban people.

After these direct contradictions, President John F. Kennedy told the reporters, as he subsequently repeated on the record, that he personally assumed responsibility for the decision to accede to the exiles' invasion of their homeland. The question was not so much who was wrong in judging the situation, he said, because there was enough blame to be shared by everyone. The question was what should be done in future confrontations with the Cuban Communists.

Sending American planes to participate in the Bay of Pigs invasion obviously would have been an act of war by the United States against Cuba. That is vastly different than tacit consent to an

invasion conducted by Cuban exiles. One of the major differences is that an open, official act of war by the United States would have challenged the Soviet Union to come to the defense of Cuba as it repeatedly has promised to do.

So which course would Senator Smith have chosen if she really had been President?

"Had I been President," she continued, "I would never have lifted the blockade of Cuba without an on-site inspection of those missile bases."

Is she, even now, so positive of this?

Imposition of the Cuban blockade was, under international law, an act of war against Cuba. It was fully justified by the Russian-Cuban missile threat, to be sure, but it was an act of war.

The blockade confronted Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev with a fateful decision. Should he respond to this U.S. warlike act with an act of war himself, as he had inferentially promised the Cubans, or should he back down?

He decided to back down. He promised that the missiles would be removed and he agreed to on-site inspections. The fateful confrontation between the United States and Russia was resolved on that basis. But Castro refused to abide by the Soviet promise of on-site inspection. The United States then faced the next alternative: Should it re-establish the blockade and thus confront the Soviets again with another warlike challenge, or should it settle for inspection of the missile sites by the same effective means by which the missiles had been discovered? Was the on-site inspection, which could be enforced only by an invasion, worth another challenge of war?

Mrs. Smith may be sure now, on the campaign trail, that she would have chosen another challenge of war. Would she have been so sure if she had been in possession of all the facts which President Kennedy had when he made his decision?

The nation cannot know, really. And we doubt that she can either.—B. J.